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ABSTRACT

Humor, a communicative tactic used to engender support, is often used, but rarely understood. The literature in the field of humor has attempted to define situations where humor could be beneficial, although few definitive answers exist relating humor to effective leadership communicative behavior. This paper presents current research findings about the symbolic nature of leadership as enacted through humor. The paper first details the important symbolic realm that leaders work within. Next, the paper discusses some of the relevant literature dealing with humor, noting that humor is a trainable skill that can be used to create a positive workplace environment. Specifically, the paper defines humor and elaborates the purposes of humor. The paper also reviews contemporary leadership literature dealing with humor. Finally, the paper evaluates the appropriateness of each form of humor and discusses 14 specific guidelines for effective humor. Contains 45 references as well as 3 figures illustrating various aspects of strategic humor in leadership. (RS)

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STRATEGIC HUMOR IN LEADERSHIP: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR APPROPRIATE USE

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Running Head: Strategic Humor

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Abstract

Humor, a communicative tactic used to engender support, is often used, but rarely understood. Literature in the field of humor has attempted to define situations where humor could be beneficial. Even today few definitive answers exist relating humor to effective leadership communicative behavior. Thus, the purpose of this research is to present current research findings about the symbolic nature of leadership as enacted through humor.

Initially, this research details the important symbolic realm that leaders work within. Next, some of the relevant literature dealing with humor is discussed. Specifically, humor is defined and the purposes of humor are elaborated. This research also reviews contemporary leadership literature dealing with humor. Finally, this research evaluates the appropriateness of each form of humor and specific guidelines for effective humor are discussed.

STRATEGIC HUMOR IN LEADERSHIP: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR APPROPRIATE USE

> "Specialists in using humor to carry a message have a message themselves: Humor is a serious communications tool" (Nation's Business, 1985, p. 46)

> "Knowledge is not objective and separate from the knower, it is socially constructed. Learning is a communal act" (Rogers, 1992, p. 251).

> "Banter helps organizations remain stable in the face of change" (Ullian, 1976, p. 129).

One of the most important functions of the effective leader is to symbolize the workworld in a manner that is insightful for followers. Leaders must use symbols that provide meaning for employees. This ominous responsibility requires the leader to have not just one communicative strategy, but many strategies that can be meaningful for all employees. Perhaps, of all the communicative strategies that leaders utilize, the use of humor is most promising, but the least understood.

Humor, like leadership, is a contextual exchange that few people understand. Also like leadership, a sensitivity to humor

can be taught to those people interested in creating a community that is not afraid to take a reflective look at itself. Humor can be used in a variety of situations to display many different feelings and thoughts of the user, but humor is not just the tool of the user. The beauty of humor is that in order for it to be effective (much like a chain letter or Amway distributorship) it must be shared. This paper first explores the symbolic landscape of the modern organization. Next, this paper discusses some of the relevant literature dealing with humor. Finally, this paper advocates the use of humor by leaders as well as some uses, outcomes, and cautions that leaders should be aware of regarding the use of humor.

Communicative Strategies for Leadership

Contemporary theories of leadership emphasize communication in order to attain success. Bennis and Nanus (1985) confirm this notion when they discuss the importance of open communication. They claim that the effective leader is not just a manager of people, but is more a manager of meanings. Organizational members are limited more by their personal constructs and leaders can assist them to achieve greater success by spinning a different web of meaning. Organizational members are also constrained by the organizational network, the hierarchy. In order to transcend and recreate the hierarchal power structure,

the leader must use communication as a tool of creating understanding between different levels of the social organization. The leader becomes the social architect of the organization. The leaders' vision of social structure is built through effective communication strategies.

These sentiments are also expressed by Deal and Kennedy (1982) in their discussion of the symbolic manager. They contend that the symbolic manager must take the lead in supporting and shaping the organizational culture. The symbolic manager must be sensitive to the culture. But more importantly, the effective symbolic leader must actively create a culture that fits the organization. To use Deal and Kennedy's terms, they must be "players in the daily drama of company affairs" (p. 142).

Message purpose and construction of effective leaders has received relatively little attention. This void is important given the promise of humor as a effective leadership communicative strategy. Fisher (1985) treats leadership as social influence "To influence is to transact a relationship mutually acceptable to all parties" (p. 171). Fisher discusses the concept of metaphor and suggested that the most appropriate metaphor for leadership is the leader as mediator of information. The leader "functions as a mediator between events or group actions and the final conclusion or actions by the group in terms of performance outcomes" (p. 182). A good leader is one that has a large repertoire of actions and beliefs that are connected and

makes observations and interpretations on the basis of context. Leaders are saddled with the task of retrospective sense making "mak[ing] sense of (interpret) information after we have first acted toward it. The greater the variety of our actions, the more complete our sense of the information we are able to process" (p. 186). Hosking (1988) concurs with this same finding that the leader must emphasize social realities and direct attention to sense making activities.

Schultz (1986) writes that certain communicative actions were closely linked with the perception of leadership. Schultz also reasons that communicative functions like goal directed, direction giving, summarizing, and self-assured were predictive of emergent leadership. Barge, Downs, and Johnson (1989) examine conversations between leaders and followers finding that similar communicative forms resulted in perceived leadership effectiveness. Sorenson and Savage (1989) argue that skillful influence strategies separate average leaders from superior leaders. Sorenson and Savage further report that leaders use dominance and supportive behaviors as the primary means of influence, and that these dimensions were somewhat predictive of effective relationships.

Barge and Hirokawa (1989) suggest that communication competencies are basic to leadership. Barge and Hirokawa also proposed that leaders must be competent in task and relational skills. Barge and Hirokawa (1989) contend that leadership is

best understood as dependent on communication competencies. These authors suggested that leader is mediation, adaptation, and adjustment. The leader is a medium for information, a view that was shared by Fisher. Barge and Hirokawa also confirmed that leadership is enacted through communicative action, "communication (production and exchange of verbal and nonverbal symbols and messages) represents the principle means by which group members attempt to help their groups overcome existing problems and barriers to goal achievement" (p. 172). Finally, they argue that communication competencies are the basis for leadership. Specifically, task (problem orientation, criteria establishment, solution activity, and procedural activity) and relational (interaction management, expressiveness, other-orientedness, and relaxation) competencies are the important elements of leadership behavior. They conclude that the communicative competency view of leadership accounts for both symbolic and substantive outcomes which were identified as important objectives that leaders must meet.

In a social-cognitive approach to leadership, Sypher (1990) suggests "...some leaders may be able to influence others, in part, because they have the ability to construe their followers in more complex, abstract, and psychologically centered ways, which enables them to produce messages that are more sensitive to the interpersonal aspects of the situations and address multiple goals" (p. 553). Sypher explains that leadership is based on

social cognition and the messages that help produce cognition. Sypher concluded that the most effective strategy for leaders is to adopt a person-centered strategy that allows leaders to achieve multiple goals with followers.

Rogers (1992) supports the idea that the leader is a symbol creator when she notes "The leader's role is to identify and validate the traditions, ideals, norms, and purposes through which members make sense of who they are and what they can achieve" (p. 249). She cites Bolman and Deal (1991) who contended that the task of the leader is to frame and give interpretation for experiences. Rogers heavily emphasizes the leader's ability to communicate in both written and oral forms in a variety of contexts to make meaning for followers.

Barge (1994) clearly notes that communication and leadership are essentially linked, "leadership is an interactional process that helps people in organizations manage their environment... For leadership to be effective, communication must help organizational members reduce ambiguity" (p. 13). Barge also suggests that leadership communicative competence is identified through three distinct dimensions, competence as knowledge, competence as performance, and competence as impression. Knowledge is central to the ability to create substance in communication, "Individuals are viewed as competent if they possess the relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities..." (p. 233). Leaders must be able to enact the appropriate

communicative strategy as well. "Competent individuals perform situationally appropriate behavior" (p. 234). Finally, leadership communication competence is based on impression; leaders are competent in as much as the follower perceives it. Barge also concluded that effective leadership communication must fit into the organizational culture that exists.

Many authors now view communication (symbolization) as the central role that leaders play. Several of the theorists take the position that communicative strategies are central to the effective functioning of a leader-member relationship. Yet other theorists suggest that leaders portray the environment through the symbols that they use. Regardless of the stance that one might adopt there is little doubt of the central role that communication has in the relationship between the environment, the follower, and the leader. Understanding the specifics of the communicative exchange (the various types of messages, the content, the relational component) is essential to better inform leaders of tomorrow. Understanding humor (one particular content style) is an important step toward having insight about how symbolic leadership works.

Humor as Communicative Technique

Humor, like leadership, is used without a great deal of understanding behind the dynamics of the event. Unlike

leadership though, few theories have emerged to explain the process of humor. This section seeks to define and explore the purposes of humor. Humor is also discussed as a presentational strategy.

Definitions of Humor

There is little recent scholarship on appropriate definitions for humor. Meyer (1990) confirms this lack of understanding, "Humor is elusive as an appeal or as a state of mind, difficult to create or to pinpoint. It is therefore difficult to study" (p. 76). Several considerations seem to emerge from the existing literature when defining humor. Some authors suggest that humor is often narrative and verbal (Hudson, 1979; Mulkay, 1988), while another indicates it contains a nonverbal element (Meyer, 1990). Meyer (1990) resist the issue of defining humor suggesting that humor cannot be detached from the context; where there is laughter there is potential for humor. Taylor (1974) suggests that humor must be listener defined. Research by Grimes (1955a) supports the position that humor is a stimulus; receiver perception and activity are the responses. Grimes notes that humor exists only to the extent the response is dependent on the antecedent wit. According to Grimes, the response to the humorous event is some manifestation of joy, either a smile or laughter. In other words, the message must be perceived by listeners as having humorous qualities. Meyer (1990) contends that humor can have affective or cognitive

implications; humor can result from either emotional or rational appeals. Research from Leventhal and Cupchik (1976) also confirm this point suggesting that each humorous situation has the possibility of being both cognitive and affective, depending on the perception of the receiver. Taken together, the literature on humor indicates that humor is a verbal or nonverbal activity eliciting a positive cognitive or affective response from listeners.

Purposes of Humor

Hudson (1979) argue that humor is best understood through the purposes it seeks to fulfill. According to Hudson (1979), humor elicits a response from listeners through (a) contrasting incongruent ideas, (b) providing a feel of superiority over others, (c) releasing strain, or (d) coping with an ambiguous audience or environment.

Humor can contrast two incongruent ideas (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972; Hudson, 1979, Meyer, 1990). This type of humor is more cognitive than affective. This type of humor is achieved by an oxymoron or by placing a person in an incongruent situation. Incongruent relationships often violate the expectation of cognitive consistency. Pleasure occurs when the audience is able to rationalize the incongruity (Grimes, 1955b). The inconsistent relationship between the real and the ideal can be utilized for humorous purposes by leaders. Meyer (1990) concludes that humor through incongruity is cognitive; the humor is effective to the

extent that the targets understand the incongruent relationship.

Humor can involve superiority over other target members (Hudson, 1979; Meyer, 1990). This view of humor is primarily emotional and is performed as a socially corrective device (Meyer, 1990). Humor based on superiority centers around inadequacies of another group, or more specifically, those people that deviate from the norm (Goldstein, 1976). Superiority is achieved when the target group feels mastery over the other deviate or inadequate person. If a source can help the targets feel they are superior to another group (or party), then the speaker would be engendered. Hudson (1979) notes that group affiliation determines to an extent our reaction to humor.

Humor can be used to release strain and tension in the target audience (Hudson, 1979; Meyer, 1990). Humor allows the release of nervous energy through laughter (Meyer, 1990) thereby serving a cathartic function (Grimes, 1955b; Hudson, 1979). According to Morreall (1983), humor is created by a reduction of anxiety or relaxation of strain. Winnick (1976) argues that jokes can defuse tension in the form of conflict mediation, "Humor is one way of bringing problems back to a manageable size" (p. 128). In fact, Shurcliff (1968) claims that the higher a subject's anxiety level was prior to tension release, the greater the judged humor in the subject. Shurcliff also reports that surprise tends to facilitate humor. The greater the surprise the more humor that is found in the incident. Releasing strain is

not necessarily tied to incongruity or to feelings of superiority, but the use of this humor can be beneficial to create ethos without creating negative perceptions of the source. This type of humor can create emotional relief and make the target group feel safe with the source.

Humor can also be used to deal "with the environment" (Hudson, 1979, p. 18). Specifically, this type of humor can be used to create a link with the target members. Essentially humor allows the source to cope with an ambiguous environment. Hudson argues that "Individuals laugh because of the social context or their relationship with other individuals. This is the base for social theorists who insist that laughter is primarily a method of dealing with the environment" (p. 18). Goldstein (1976) also demonstrates this type of humor through the Heider balance theory; the humor plays on the positively balanced relationship between person, group, and joke. Self-disparaging humor may easily fall in this category. For Goldstein the purpose of the self-disparaging comment is to create a positive common bond with the target. Self-disparaging humor seeks a favorable response from the listeners, at the expense of the speaker (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976). Self-disparaging humor seems to contradict the superiority theory and does not fit uniquely in the tension or incongruity category, but it can be used effectively. Contextually bound humor is used to create a common bond with the audience and is perceived as emotional rather than cognitive.

Humor as Presentational Strategy

Gruner claims that humor can increase either the popularity (1965a) or influence (1965b) of the speaker. Goodchilds (1959) suggests that humor from clowning wits was rated as low in influence and high in popularity and that sarcastic wits were rated oppositely. Gruner (1985) summarizes that humor can produce a more positive audience reaction toward the speaker, enhance the interestingness of the speech, influence the effectiveness of persuasive speeches (positively or negatively), and may produce better long-term recall of the speech. Munn and Gruner (1981) warns that the use of "sick" humor is generally funny, but tends to yield lower effectiveness scores and character scores. Gruner (1970) finds that humor enhances both interesting and dull speeches and can enhance the character rating of speakers. Taylor (1974) concludes that the use of humor may not have a positive effect on speaker ethos. The warning seems to be that speakers should carefully choose the amount and type of humor. Furthermore, speakers should avoid sick or clowning humor in order to build speaker ethos.

Zillmann and Stocking (1976) suggests that putdown humor is used widely as a method to link with a others. Self-disparaging humor is used to control situations much like the humor used to putdown others. Zillmann and Stocking also claim that women have a much greater preference to watch self-disparagement humor than do men. To explain the results the authors point to the broader

social context in which women and men function, suggesting that dominance structures may allow males less ability to enjoy poking fun at themselves. Chang and Gruner (1981) suggest that self-disparaging humor was significantly effective if it did not offend the values of the audience. In their study, Chang and Gruner also find that there was little decrease in the rating of character even in light of the introduction of self-disparaging humor. Gruner (1985) summarizes the research on self-disparagement, "Humor that is self-disparaging may further enhance speaker image" (p. 142). Gruner does however warn "Appearantly, self-disparaging humor needs to be indirect, more witty that low humorous, and based on clever word-play, not direct exaggeration of one's own personal defects" (p. 143).

The Humorous Leader: Strategy and Spontaneity

Workplace humor is used to project the culture of the organization. As noted by several authors, the leader plays an important role in the symbolization and projection of the culture. Leaders must provide meaning for followers. Dandridge, Mitroff & Joyce (1980) indicates that leaders use humor to symbolize the organization. Humorous communication in the workplace must be examined to give a clearer view of the natural workplace to determine the appropriate humor in that context.

Research Insights into Leaders' Humor

Research on the use of humor in the workplace is sporadic and scarce. Few authors take more than a qualified position saying humor can be beneficial if used in very specific and controlled situations. Most of the research is anecdotal and lacks specificity to leadership. Overall, the state of research on the leaders' use of humor lacks a clear cohesive picture and is of the workplace of the past.

Roy (1960) makes very specific reference to the humorous experiences in a small industrial work group. Roy explains that the members of the group altered their structured environment by varying the color and shapes and by "scraping the block" (p. 160), a social industrial process where people were allowed to interact. The overall findings suggested that serious periods had interspersed periods of "horseplay" focusing around the consumption of food (a break from normal routine operations). The occurrence of "peach time" and "banana time" were traditional rituals of the workplace that allowed the members to relax and interact aside from the heavy industrial operations they performed otherwise. Roy also points to the occasional kidding language that was used between the workers, suggesting that the breaks were more than relaxation periods, there are clear expectations for humor. Finally, according to Roy's recount of the situation, the kidding humor was used to overcome tensions of relational decay. After withdrawn members are ready to be back

in the informal network sarcastic kidding humor can be one way to facilitate this transition.

Sykes (1966) also spends considerable time developing the nature of joking relationships in a mixed sex industrial setting. Sykes explicates that often the jokes occurring in that context were often of sexual nature. Sykes reports that sexual joking was a prelude to petting, and in some cases, sexual relationships between young men and women. However, the joking relationship was considerably more obscene between young and old divisions, these were also contexts which prohibited sexual relations. Overall, Sykes pointed out that the joking relationship can be important prelude, and substitution, for intimacy in the workplace.

Lundberg (1969) analyzes an electric motor machine shop in which he was able to categorize different types of interaction patterns concerning joking behavior. Lundberg theorizes about the various joking patterns: joking without a public, initiator as focus, focus other than inititiator or target, target as focus, group as target. Lundberg concludes that intragroup joking is accepted and even contributed by the target, and that intragroup joking is tolerated if the initiator's group is present but not the group of the target. If the target's group is the public, but not the initiator, or if the initiator is of lower status, then the joke is not effective. Peers and closely ranked people of the same group have the most fun, while lower

ranking people tend to joke back less with higher ranking initiators. Lundberg also concludes that joking fulfills a social function that redefines a social group and reinforces the perceptual ranking of group and members to others.

Ullian (1976) discusses the use of joking based on empirical observation in an industrial setting. Like Sykes and Roy, Ullian confirms that humorous joking occurred in definite patterns. Specifically, humor was commonly used in Ullian's setting when new information was released. The person who introduced the new information was the target of the joke, while the person who the information most effected was the joker.

Duncan (1982) suggests that humor can impact the workgroup positively. However Duncan cautions that little systematic work had been done on the topic. Because humor is uniquely individual the effects of humor may be hard to discern. To some extent the effects are mediated by the context which the joke occurs in. Support has been found for this idea in that humor varies with cohesion (Duncan, 1984), with the power of the interactants (Duncan, 1984; Lundberg, 1969; Vinton, 1989), and with the content of the interaction (Ullian, 1976). Duncan also stresses that an effective manager must match humor to the situation due to the potential inherent destructive aspects of joking.

Duncan (1984) contends that humor in the workplace was one method of creating normative behavior. Humor is related to situations of power and structure, much as superiority theory

argues. Duncan posits that high status people often initiate the humor, but rarely receive the brunt of the joke. In more cohesive workgroups, humor tended to have more effect. Duncan also reports that more interactive people tended to be in more humorous situations. Duncan (1984, p. 905) summarizes the results in terms of the importance of humor for managers,

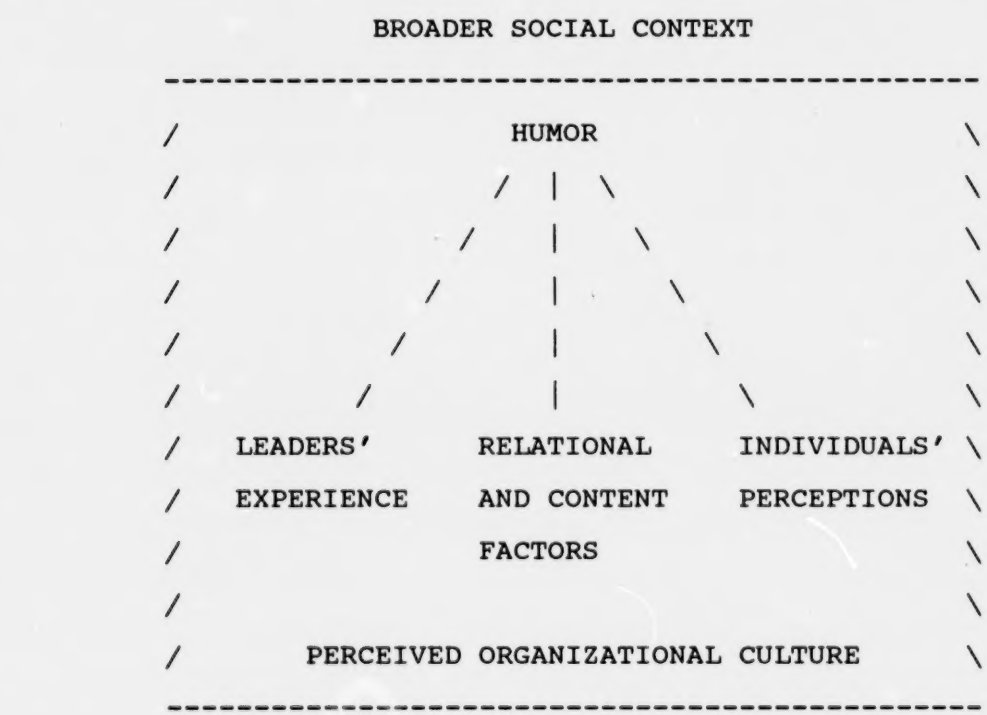
> "...managers are not often joked about unless they are also accepted as friends and are perceived to be occasional initiators of jokes. From this it appears that when managers involve themselves in the humor network by initiating jokes they can expect to have jokes directed at them as well. Formal leaders generally joke as much as others with equal status"

Duncan also speculates that the use of humor by the leader was one method to minimize social distance and identity with the employees. Duncan concludes that humor fulfills important social roles in the group setting.

Based on Duncan's research, humor can be best modeled by looking at the interplay between individual, group, and larger social contexts as Figure 1 attempts to do.

Figure 1

A Model of the Humor Experience in the Workplace



In a study of a small production oriented business, Vinton (1989) argues that the use of humor helped to create an organizational culture. Vinton presents a strategy for categorizing humor that provided insight into the varied types of humor that occur. Figure 2 provides a brief description of the type of humor used.

Figure 2

Vinton's (1989) Taxonomy of Enacted Humor

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(1) puns

(2) goofing off (slapstick)

(3) jokes/anecdotes

    (a) humorous self-ridicule

    (b) bawdy jokes (sexual or racial bias)

    (c) industry jokes

(4) teasing

    (a) teasing to get things done

    (b) bantering

Members often told jokes or anecdotes about others and themselves that left the teller of the joke as the brunt. Teasing tended to be used by members of higher status level to influence lower status people, while bantering was used regardless of status level. Overall, members handled the teasing well, and according to Vinton, no instance of irritation occurred. Vinton claims that humor fulfills a need for socialization into the group and also helps to define the power structures that existed in the group. In other words, humor can both serve the function of inclusion and the function of exclusion at the same time. Humor allows people to push the limit of their network, but also allows for members of the social group to define roles too.

Davis and Kleiner (1989) explicitly define the importance of humor to the leader. Like other humor theorists, Davis and Kleiner indicate that humor is driven by the desire for superiority, the drive to "get" the joke, and the need to release internal tension through the telling of the joke. These authors also point to the practical benefits of humor in leadership, namely reducing stress, helping employees understand management's concerns, and motivating employees. In terms of stress reduction, several organizations (Safeway, Internal Revenue Service, Northwestern Bell, Manville Corp.) have integrated humor training to stem rising health care costs. However, their benefit has been arguably small (Newsweek, October 12, 1987). Davis and Kleiner also contend that the ability to communicate the concerns of leaders to employees is maximized through effective humor, as is the ability to motivate employees into action.

Strategic Uses of Humor

A strategy is a planned, practiced skill used in management of employees. Strategies are designed to make the process of managing more understandable and to bring in into the rational realm. Humor is a skill that managers use to effect results in the workplace.

Humor as strategy can follow the forms that Hudson (1979) argues for. Leaders can use humor to contrast incongruent ideas. This form of humor seems very plausible given the need for

corrective action in the organization. The incongruent situation could arise when an employee performs improperly. The leader can utilize a non-disparaging style of humor to show that the employee's improper action and organizational values are inconsistent, thus showing the need for change.

Hudson (1979) also suggests that humor can be used to emphasize superiority of one person over another. As several researchers note, humor is one method of delineating the power structures of an organization. This type of humor is generally corrective, but in some respects this type of humor can serve as a social reward for those inclined to be upwardly mobile - you climb the organizational ladder to gain power, humor can be one tool used to show that you are gaining the power. This type of humor, however, runs the risk of being putdown humor. As Zillmann and Stocking remind, the use of putdown humor in friendly relations can be counterproductive. Much care should be taken when using humor that places one person superior to another.

Perhaps the most beneficial use of humor is the type that releases strain and tension in the employees. The catharsis that occurs from the release of laughter can be useful in many different contexts. Arguably, this type of humor is appropriate in situations were tension is escalating beyond a productive limit. As Winnick (1976) claim, the ability to bring a problem under control is one of the most important characteristics of

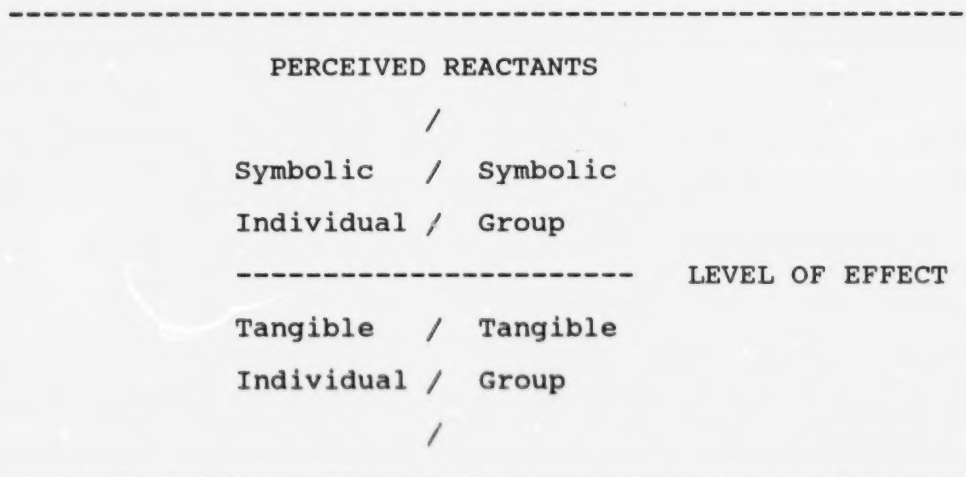
humor. Humor also serves the function of reducing the overall stress level of the organization, a point which will be expanded later.

The final form that humor can take, according to Hudson, is humor that puts the environment, the humor source, the target, and the actual humorous instance, in congruence. Humor is an excellent tool that is used to connect the environment (context and employees) with the source (leader) to provide a more positive relationship. Goldstein (1976) suggests that a joke connects the source with the reference group. When the context is too serious or not hospitable then joking behavior is one method for the leader to show that the situation is controllable, in at least a cognitive sense. This type of humor also allows for the leader to cope with an ambiguous or changing environment. Overall, this type of humor takes the least work because the feelings of others really are not a major consideration when you poke fun at the context.

Related to the idea that humor can effectively fulfill purposes is the notion that humor can produce effective outcomes. Several authors seem very convinced that the use of humor produces significant outcomes. These outcomes can be categorized loosely into the symbolic and the tangible oriented, which can be divided by the extent of the effect, individual level to group level. Figure 3 defines the relationship between the two dimensions.

Figure 3

Outcomes Associated with Humor



As per the symbolic outcomes, there are two basic outcomes that humor can produce. Humor can be used to simply deliver a message about the appropriateness of certain behaviors, be that human action or communicative action. Leaders can produce a pun or joke that points directly at the employees behavior. Interestingly, this use can reinforce positive desirable behavior, as well as discourage the negative behaviors that sometimes occur. This humor can be in the form of the self-disparaging comment, but the leader must remember to keep the credibility high if they are attempting to discourage certain behavioral forms. The second symbol oriented outcome relates to the enactment of power structures. Several authors discussed how

humor is one tool that separates management and employees, either by content, or just by sheer quantity of humorous remarks. Humor can assist the leader in bridging the gap between management and employees. The point is that power structures can be either built or destroyed with the humor that is used. It seems that the leader has an explicit responsibility to build the appropriate power structures for the situation, and humor can be one method of enacting power without codifying power.

Humor can certainly effect changes in tangible outcomes as well. Specifically, humor can be used to reduce the stress inherent within the modern organization. Humor serves this function several different ways. The culture that is created by the relevant humorous act can transform organizational stress into something more manageable. Michael Burger, a humor specialist, notes that humor can get people in a more relaxed mood which causes them to be more receptive to changes. Robert Orben also suggests that humor can create rapport, relieve tension, defuse hostility, and motivate an audience. Orben speaks of the second type of outcome that has been largely ignored except through anecdotal evidence. Humor, for many, is but one means to increase the satisfaction level of the individual, the social group, and the larger organizational culture. Davis and Kleiner suggest that humor has direct effect on the level of satisfaction in the IRS. Finally, the evidence in terms of the use of humor having an effect on workplace

variables like turnover, burnout, and the level of production have simply not been adequately researched. All of these tangible outcomes must be further studied in order to assert that humor can help people and organizations.

Warnings and Cautions

Duncan (1984) and Davis and Kleiner (1989) provided several important cautions when attempting humor. Among the implications:

* Humor should not be avoided, just approach humor with respect for the fellow person.
* Minimize the offensive nature of joking by avoiding jokes that discriminate against people (even lawyers).
* Aggressive, putdown humor should be avoided generally.
* A climate of reciprocal humor (between leader and follower) should be encouraged.
* Keep the humor relevant to the situation/context.
* Make sure that the humor reflects the interests and language of the followers.
* Make the humor brief and conversational, no one likes to get lost in a joke or story and miss the punch line.
* If delivered in address form, humor must be adapted to a conversational tone not a written tone.
* Use self-effacing humor if the situation warrants (you have high credibility and you may have made a mistake).
* Take your message seriously, don't take yourself too

seriously.

* Remember to attack the position through humor, not the person's dignity.
* Avoid inconsistent humor, its better that people think that you have no sense of humor than to attack them or not have them understand your line of reasoning.
* Avoid topics that center around sex, illegal activity, or other organizational topics that are strongly taboo.
* Look spontaneous, be prepared.

Conclusions

That humor can be a productive tool for a leader is of little question. The question becomes more of how humor can be best used and the immediate and delayed benefits of the use of humor. Humor is more than telling the nominal joke at the beginning of the Annual Meeting, or the office cartoon that few people understand, humor is a dynamic symbolic communicative act that links people. Humor is useful to leaders who want the ability to symbolize the organization through a non-serious means. Humor is a trainable skill; a strategy that everyone can use to create a positive workplace environment. However, care should be taken that employees are not alienated by being the brunt of the joke. Symbolic leaders must take the opportunity for humor seriously, and take the serious organization

humorously.

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Endnotes

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